

Wedding traditions dying out

Are traditional weddings on the decline? Is the situation so dire that such ceremonies have to be made compulsory to preserve the diverse culture and heritage of our multiracial community, as suggested by Information, Communication and Culture Deputy Minister Datuk Maglin Dennis D' Cruz recently? **CHAI MEI LING** and **TAN CHOE CHOE** found that in this modern age, everyone prefers things to be as fuss-free and simple as possible — not just to save time, but also money

IN some cultures, the more tedious and time-consuming rituals have been done away with completely.

There are also a growing number of people who just solemnise their union before a religious leader like a kadi in the case of Muslims, or the Registrar of Marriages for non-Muslims.

"My fear right now is our (wedding) traditions and cultures will completely disappear one day," said Cedric Tan, assistant secretary of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

"They are a reflection of our culture, our identity — they are a testimony to the fact that we have come so far and survived so long."

'Merisik' and 'berbalas pantun' dropped

Merisik, loosely translated as investigating or spying on the prospective bride to see if she has already been spoken for, is hardly carried out these days.

Nowadays, couples would already

family, led by the patriarch of the family, visiting the bride's family to discuss dowry, wedding expenses, gifts and the duration of engagement.

The *berbalas pantun* (pantun exchange) ritual during *meminang* has also been done away with.

"Now they just go straight to the point without wasting time on exchanging flowery words.

"It also makes it easier for both parties as not many of our younger generation now are skilled in *berbalas pantun*," said Zanaidi.

Traditional Malay wedding customs usually include *merisik*, *meminang* (engagement), *menghantar tanda* (engagement ring ceremony), *hantaran belanja* (gift exchanging ceremony), *bernikah* (solemnisation), *berinai besar* (blessing ceremony), *hari persandingan* (wedding day) and *jemput menantu* (wedding reception at groom's family home).

"Generally, the other ceremonies are adhered to, but in some areas, in terms of dressing and use of material, things have been modernised and simplified to save time and costs," said Zanaidi.

plain water instead of rose water during the *berinai* ceremony. Instead of home-made *inai*, most just buy off the shelf.

In terms of bridal attire, brides are also opting for trendier materials like lace and chiffon, instead of *kain songket* for the wedding day.

"I guess it's because our weather is getting warmer... and also, the other material makes for more fashionable wear," said Noorazrie Yahaya, a Malay wedding planner in Malacca.

She is also seeing more couples, especially when it involves divorcees and widows or widowers, opting to go straight for the *nikah* ceremony and then holding a simple *kenduri* (banquet) for guests.

"They have already been there and done that, so most just prefer to have a simple solemnisation ceremony," said Noorazrie, who has had 20 years of experience in the industry.

Some younger couples who want to save money and don't care much for tradition also just have the *nikah*.

"Maybe the groom does not like to be in the limelight or maybe it is

cate the bride with some wedding studio shots, which was not previously part of our wedding culture. But they are still a minority," she added.

No more roosters under the bed

From sedan chairs, blaring trumpets and firecrackers to modern games, white gowns and lavish spreads at hotel ballrooms — the features of a Chinese wedding have evolved considerably over the years.

Rituals have also been simplified, but their meanings have largely been retained.

For example, the groom's parents are supposed to set up the bridal bed during the "bed installation" ceremony three days before the wedding, but today, many symbolically do so by just covering the mattress with bed linen, said Doris Fong, a *dai kam jie* or wedding chaperone.

Red — traditionally a colour of prosperity and luck — remains popular among marrying couples, but

blue — are not seen during the wedding," said wedding planner Leticia Hsu of Events Wizard Sdn Bhd.

Thomas Koo, marketing manager at Posh Wedding Bridal Gallery, noted that as more brides trade the traditional bright-red *qi pao* or cheongsam for the conventional white wedding gown, they naturally no longer consider red as a must-have theme colour.

The wedding day tea ceremony is still very much practised as a symbol of filial piety, said wedding planner Eileen Lui; what has changed is the declining participation of the *dai kam jie*.

The chaperone, normally an elderly woman experienced in wedding rites and rituals, is hired by the groom's family to ensure certain traditions are observed.

"Only two out of 10 weddings we plan have requested for a *dai kam jie*. Many English-educated couples opt to go without the chaperone to keep the tea ceremony simple," said Lui, from Nupts and Such Sdn Bhd.

Even the tea set is modernised as couples do away with the traditional

...ciding to marry, hence *mertsik* is becoming redundant, said *pak andam* or wedding planner Zanaidi Mohd Noor.

Often, couples just proceed directly to *meminang* (engagement); with the groom's

So they pla-

colours rather than stick to red as the only theme colour.

"Most parents accept it as long as taboo colours — white, black and

phoenix and dragon motifs with gold trimmings.

"Since this is a keepsake for the bride, most prefer a much nicer set," said Lui.

Because certain must-have items can be troublesome to obtain, keep

Traditional Malay weddings have also undergone some changes over the years.





Amu Krishnan (left) says more Indian couples are simplifying wedding ceremonies.



An Indian bridal shop located in Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur.

and use, they can be symbolically substituted.

For example, tradition requires two live chickens — a hen and a rooster — to be placed under the matrimonial bed.

"Whichever emerges first foretells the sex of the first-born.

Another ritual is to have the gift of

Prosperity this Chinese New Year, you can do so next year. But welcoming abundant luck during a wedding is once-in-a-lifetime."

Prayer and tying of thali adhered to

saree, garlands, the priest's and drummers' fees.

An average wedding costs nothing less than RM50,000, excluding jewellery; while an elaborate one starts at RM100,000, she said.

"A lot of customary rituals are actually self-created. People think everything is a must, but it's best to go ahead only with what's impor-

Peranakan wedding actually stretches across 12 days, with different rituals designated for each day.

"But people now don't have the time to invest in a 12-day celebration so the wedding has been condensed to just one day.

"Some rituals have survived, while others have been done away with."

"So now, you have the tea-ceremony and the *soja tiga hari* in the morning.

"Then in the late afternoon, the bride pops back to her parents' home with some sweet cakes.

"She gets a change of attire before returning to the new husband's home with a pair of sugar canes from her parents as best wishes for a

Wedding chapérons, said Hsu, have advised less traditional families to replace these items with red packets specifically created for this purpose.

"The ang pow would have the word 'chicken' printed on it, and a symbolic amount of money is placed inside in lieu of the actual chicken."

Some couples completely ignore certain ceremonies.

Hsu said most families feel the hair-combing ceremony, to be done a night before the wedding day, is old fashioned.

"It needs to be conducted by a happily married woman who has grandchildren or great grandchildren, which is difficult to come by these days."

Fong, who operates wedding shop Syarikat Megah in Thean Hou Temple, said shopping for customary products is easier these days as they are often pre-packaged.

For example, a set of items that should be placed on the bridal bed — which include dried longans, red dates, persimmons, lily bulbs, lotus seeds, a piece of charcoal, pomegranate leaves, cotton, rice and beans — now comes in pre-packed trays.

Each item carries an auspicious meaning. The dried lily bulbs or *pak hup* stands for a hundred years of harmony in marriage.

Lotus seeds and pomegranate leaves bless the union with fertility. The cotton signifies a long-lasting union, while the charcoal means perpetual love.

Rituals are abundant and would be hard to be followed to a tee, but keeping to the most basic is important to ensure tradition lives on, said Fong.

"If you miss receiving the God of

wealth, elaborate weddings these days, said wedding planner Amu Krishnan.

"Whatever rituals they can omit, they omit, keeping only the most important ones — a simple prayer, the tying of thali (wedding chain) and registration."

Some brides and grooms have been known to skip the important attire-changing ceremony.

Amu, the executive director and principal of Amu's Academy of Bridal & Beauty, believes the rise of this trend is greatly influenced by the need to cut costs and hassle.

A very basic wedding costs at least RM10,000, she said, adding that it's a very tight budget just enough to cover reception charges, hall rental,

For example, hall decoration, which lasts only a day, can cost anything from RM5,000 to over RM100,000.

"There's value in tradition, but only if we can afford it and if it's practical.

"I always tell couples to plan their wedding based on their budget. Extra money is better invested in a house or a car," said Amu, who has 25 years of experience.

There are also couples who opt for a no-frills wedding, inviting only the closest of guests to their house and holding a simple ceremony and reception there.

Wedding planner Shamini Gnanam from D'Wedding Gardens said couples still splurge on weddings, but the focus has shifted to holding grand receptions.

"Couples in their 20s are cutting down on traditions, choosing to have simple ceremonies in temples. But that's about the only thing they simplify."

Receptions, she said, are normally elaborate dos in hotel ballrooms with modern concepts.

A client had once requested for a peacock-themed wedding, for example.

There is also an increasing trend in beach weddings and garden parties, added Shamini.

Inter-racial weddings

Inter-racial marriage, particularly with Chinese, has significantly diluted the Peranakan customs, according to Cedric Tan, assistant secretary of Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur and Selangor.

Many don't know that a traditional

Back then, the tea-ceremony to introduce the new couple to the relatives was conducted on the first day, while the *soja tiga hari* to pay respects to the elders by bowing to them was on the third day.

All these are now crammed into one day, including the bride's visit to her parents' home to ensure she was well, which would have taken place on the last day of the wedding ceremony.

sweet and happy marriage," said Tan. Other significant events that have been dropped include teasing the bride to laugh with *pantun* and jokes, and determining her virginity by checking her trousers at the end of the 12th day.

What do you think? Let us know at nsunt@nst.com.my



Wedding planner Zanaidi Mohd Noor says Malay weddings have been simplified



Modern Chinese tea sets do not have the dragon and phoenix motifs.